DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 289 EC 162 194

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TITLE Using Experience Language (LEA Variation) to Teach an Autistic-Like Child with a Visual Disorder to Read (and Write and Talk).
PUB DATE [Oct 83]
NOTE 34p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Great Lakes Regional International Reading Association (5th, Springfield, IL, October 5-8, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autism; Case Studies; *Communication Disorders; Language Acquisition; *Language Experience Approach; Multiple Disabilities; *Parent Child Relationship; Personal Narratives; Visual Impairments

ABSTRACT

The author, a university professor, describes his experiences in teaching language to his autistic-like son who also has visual impairments. "Experience Language," an adaptation of Language Experience Approach (LEA) is described, and its contributions to the child's reading, writing, and talking are noted. Suggestions are made on the importance of working on all areas of communication (speaking, writing, reading) at all times, working toward independence in stages, and avoiding becoming restricted by routine. The use of food, color, and music in the child's learning is examined. The importance of home-school coordination and cooperation is emphasized. (CL)

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ED243289

USING EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE (LEA VARIATION) TO TEACH AN AUTISTIC-LIKE CHILD WITH A VISUAL DISORDER TO READ (and Write and Talk)

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Article Extract

This article relates specific ways that EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE (a variation of LEA) was used to help Mark (now age 14) to read, write and talk. The article explores and explains fifteen ideas relevant to teaching a child with autistic-like characteristics and a visual disorder. A major portion of the article deals with "How to do it" and "Why."

Author Biography

Mark and Susan's dad; father of a disabled learner and a more normal learner. A lucky husband and father.

-B. S. in Education from Eastern Illinois University, 1961

-M. S. in Education from Eastern Illinois University, 1962

-Ph.D. in Education from University of Illinois - Urbana, 1971

-Teacher of normal pupils and disabled and disordered in grades three through twelve during 1960-1968.

-Involved as a teacher educator for a summer term at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, 1966 and Wisconsin State University - Platteville, 1968.

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Eye-Opener Number One

"How can he be taught to read? He can't even talk?" This must have been how the kindergarten teacher felt after the initial conference with Mark's parents. Unquestionably, it was what was on the mind of Mark's parents after having been shown the goals of the kindergarten class into which their child was about to enter. Mark was six and this was just the beginning of trying to make school circumstances match his needs.

Eye-Opener Number Two

"Written language skills (reading and writing) proceed naturally from already learned oral language skills." That's what both parents had been taught in teacher education classes; that is what the father was telling his teacher education students. That was not what seemed to be happening with their son, Mark.

Eye-Opener Number Three

"IATEDADDYSCRTSANDSUSANPUNCHEDMEINTHESTOMAK." That's what was on the chalkboard and that is what Mark (age approximately eight) had just said. It was almost unbelieveable; Mark actually said that...he tattled...Hurrah! As Mark waited for some response from Father, his very being seemed to be sending a message to Father which said, "See, if I write it first, then I can say it!" What a way to begin spontaneous talking--tattling on his three-year-old sister, Susan! (The comments from Mark followed: a fuss with Susan in the kitchen, his hasty retreat to the family room chalkboard where the above sentence was written and his appearance in the living room where Father was seated. In case you haven't decoded the message yet, it says, "I ate Daddy's Certs and Susan punched me in the stomach!")

It seems more and more necessary to share the teaching of Mark with others as his communicative abilities continue to unfold. There is no way to know at this point the typicalness of Mark's response to the EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE techniques...all the more reason to share them so that others can affirm, confirm or disallow EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE as a widely useful tool for teaching. Although some of what is suggested here is in some ways similar to the special adaptions of LEA suggested for second language learners (Shepherd, 1978), the ideas presented here relate specifically to teaching a child with multiple learning disorders. Did they work for Mark and Mark alone or are they partially or wholly useful basics for working with many other children? You decide.

Nearly fifteen years with Mark have caused Mark's parents to rethink much of what they were taught in teacher education courses. Two Bachelor of Science degrees, two Master of Science degrees and one Ph. D. did not sufficiently prepare two people to be Mark's parents and teachers; the education helped and formed the basis for what was done and the special adjustments seemed to make the difference. The author is Mark's father, but what is shared reflects the cooperative efforts of two parents, a younger sister and many teachers, therapists, aides, etc.

At least six things seem to have been powerful ingredients for promoting Mark's progress. One was the belief by parents and teachers that Mark was intelligent enough to function somewhat normally even though he did not talk appropriately. Mark's kindergarten teacher (same teacher for two years) kept saying, "I just know he can make it." Three cheers for the good Pygmalion in the Classroom (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968); may Pygmalion do good things in more classrooms and homes. A second component was having speech therapists who were able to adjust or learn to teach a communicatively

disordered child even though they had been trained mainly in articulation and rhythmic diagnosis and correction. It wasn't just speech that was a problem; it wasn't just language that was missing; it was the whole area of social/communicative functioning that was short-circuited. A third helpful factor was hand/eye coordination therapy. This seemed to help Mark in specific hand/eye tasks and with general coordination tasks; it also was a positive, concrete experience that the family shared together. The fourth ingredient that seemed to be a strong factor was the continuous, positive and cooperative working relationship established between Mark's public school teachers and his parents. Another factor boosting Mark was his incredible musical ability and interest. All of the above five factors played important roles in helping Mark progress; however, the sixth factor, EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE, is the area of major emphasis in this article. EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE is specific adaptations and premises of LEA utilized to teach Mark, a child with autistic-like behaviors who is also visually handicapped. Since teaching Mark was a highly individualized effort (as all good teaching should be), it seems appropriate to introduce Mark. After the sections on Mark (Then and Now) the reasoning behind EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE for Mark is presented. Finally, a summarized version of "How to do it" and "Why" is presented as a reflection of what was or should have been happening.

Meet Mark

Then

It is impossible to know how normally Mark functioned as an infant. Being a first child prevented comparisons with another sibling so the parents assumed that his behaviors were normal; much of what autism is does not manifest itself developmentally until age one to three. There was no

medical evidence to the contrary except for vision problems. The strabismus was noted by a pediatrician when Mark was six months old; the severe myopia was thought to be somewhat corrected by eyeglasses when Mark was 18 months old. In retrospect, there were some behaviors that might have given the parents reasons for concern, but they were not focused until approximately age three when Mark's frustration - apparently from his inability to communicate - seemed to escalate to a new high. The mere repetition of what others had said (echolalia) did not produce the desired results for Mark and tantrums and head-banging were common behaviors for him at this time. Mark could repeat any words he chose to repeat; he even repeated conversations he had heard; he could sing many songs; but he did not produce useful language and he did not ask or answer questions; in fact, he was even unable to respond appropriately to yes or no questions or choice questions. (Example of a choice question: Do you want some cake or a cookie? To which he would echo, "Do you want some cake or a cookie?") Though it was unknown to the parents at the time due to "no access" to medical and psychological reports at that time, it is now known that Mark was diagnosed as having autistic tendencies at age five-and-a-half years--1972). (More recent evaluations in 1979 and 1980 give similar assessments.)

Mark was read to a great deal during the early months of his life and thereafter. How valuable this was is not clear; he tolerated a great deal of reading but was not an enthusiastic consumer. He seemed to prefer listening to records; in fact, it was said of him that music soothed the soul of the savage beast that frequently appeared within him. Music would quiet him when nothing else would. Part of the problem may have been due to his visual problems. He was not very interested in "book" pictures; most pictures had much too complicated ("busy") pictures for his hard-to-control (strabismic),

myopic eyes. At age four the parents began to use some photographs of Mark and his family for labeling and quasi-LEA activities; this seemed more successful than "store" books, but was not seen as greatly significant at the time. Communication was nearly non-existent and frustration was mushrooming for Mark and his parents. LIFE THEN WAS TOUGH for everyone!

Now

At age fourteen-and-a-half, Mark now reads, writes and talks with increasing precision. He is not functioning "at" age level and may never achieve this, but he has made miraculous progress and continues to improve at this writing. In fact, as this is being written, Mark is playing Scrabble with his mother and nine-year-old sister. During Christmas week, 1980 (as this was being composed), Mark spontaneously wrote a 151-word letter to his cousin. It had a relatively appropriate greeting and closing and contained all sentences which are begun with capital letters and ended correctly with periods. It is not paragraphed and the organization is not the best, but it was written and written spontaneously and its content is appropriate to the person addressed. All but four words seem to be correctly spelled: har-monica, sisers, geting and Gerry. Correctly spelled were high frequency words and other words such as: pianos, grassy, grandma, sorry, love, fabulous, broke, pretty and christmas. A few of the proper nouns were capitalized; most were not. SO WHAT??? Here's what--That's a long way from his virtually zero communication skills at age seven.

Mark took his turn and read one paragraph from the morning family devotion booklet today. He is not a good reader for his age but he can read. Prior to leaving for school, he practiced on the piano for several minutes. He has absolute pitch and can play with harmony those melodies that he knows on either the piano or organ. He derives a great deal of

enjoyment from playing the organ and spends several five to thirty minute periods playing it during a usual day. Sometimes he plays for himself only and uses the earphones and sometimes he plays for others. He often announces to the family that he is playing a new song that he has learned from one of his records. Interest and aptitude in music is not uncommon for autistic-like children (Rimland, 1978; Chastine, 1979).

Mark's speech is not very typical, but he continues to be able to communicate with an ever-increasing number of persons on an ever-increasing number of topics.

Mark is becoming an adequate listener. He is able to focus his attention to another person for increasingly longer periods of time. He has difficulty with non-specific terms (maybe) and non-literal comments (figures of speech); recently, he began to sometimes ask "What?" when he doesn't understand (or doesn't want to comply).

There are many miles to go, but if fatigue doesn't burn everyone out, it seems Mark will continue to make communicative progress.

Why Use an Experience Language Approach (LEA) with a Child with Autustic Tendencies?

The Nature of Autism

Fourteen years with an "autistic-like" child causes one to be cautious when describing autism. Although there are many lists of characteristics which purport to describe or identify such children, it is also very true that the individuals so described and/or identified may have more differences than similarities. Care must be used in setting forth the nature of autistic behavior.

By root-word definition, autism is "self-ism." The individual who has autistic-type behaviors is often socially withdrawn and/or socially unskilled;

language/communication abilities are often impaired or incapacitated. Characteristics or behaviors may range from remaining in a fetal position, muteness and apparent oblivion to all that goes on around him/her...to near normal social behavior with slight aversions to talking, being touched and/or group involvement under certain circumstances. Often normal or better than intellectual potential is indicated though it is difficult to determine due to the nature of this syndrome. Such tendencies as resistance to (or inability to accomplish) eye contact, routine boundedness, echoic-type language, perseveration (can't stop saying or doing something) and resistance to change are not at all uncommon in autistically disabled persons. [Autism is currently widely assumed to be organic in nature (Paluszny, 1979).]

The Nature of Language Experience Approaches (LEAs)

Over twenty years of using various aspects of language and experience to help children and adults develop or refine speaking, reading, writing and listening abilities promotes caution in describing any language experience approach. However, the many variations have some similarities. Typically, an adult records in writing what a child says about some extemporaneous or structured experience. This becomes the basis of or content for teaching the child to read. It is a method where a non- or semi-literate person works with a literate companion (peer partner, teacher, aide, parent, etc.) who serves as a scribe to record in written form the information spoken by the person learning to read. The individual then learns to meaningfully decode the graphic symbols (letters/graphemes)...i.e., learns to read.

Common Sense of the Situation

Autism, by definition, is primary involvement with self, a high degree of ignoring others and their activities and a great propensity for inflexible routine. A highly personalized, concrete and flexible approach such as LEA

should be appropriate for a child with these kinds of characteristics.

Using such a strategy should facilitate meaningful decoding since the meaning would be directly related to a personally experienced event or happening. Meaningful decoding was no small concern for Mark; at the age of seven, he came home with basal textbook materials that he could "read", that is, he could reproduce the appropriate sounds (word calling without comprehension), but without any obvious understanding of what the meaning was or that the sounds were supposed to be meaningful. When EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE was utilized with Mark the whole idea of language (both oral and written) being meaningful seemed to begin to develop. The personalness and concreteness of EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE seemed to be what was needed to promote comprehension with this autistic-like child.

Any LEA has within it a great deal of specific structure in terms of procedures which are somewhat similar any time it is utilized and it also has the built-in ability to be flexible. The procedures are predictable (routine) but the content can be based on science, social studies, health, etc. Routine is unadvoidable with most autistic-like children; LEA adapts well to routine but also has by nature the option and necessity for new experiences and hence, flexibility.

Uncommon Sense of the Situation

In many ways LEA seems ideal and is ideal, but in some ways LEA had to be reconciled to Mark. Some of the ideas that then seemed uncommon to LEA now seem very common; at the time LEA was begun with Mark, the ideas presented here had not been carefully considered by the author. It was only after they were dealt with effectively that their value was confirmed. It is this considered, trial and error, emphasis on some things and ignoring or paying less attention to some other aspects that formulate the essence of

EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE. No doubt, some of them are common practices; it is equally likely that most are only a minor modification from the way that most teachers utilize LEA; however, the sum total of the manipulations utilized created for Mark the most useful, and only long-term successful means of dealing with all his communication deficits. They are presented as a list which follows and will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Most of the ideas are not grandiose--many are similar--yet, each in its own specific way seemed to contribute significantly to Mark's progress.

After fourteen years of working with Mark these ideas have surfaced as being important enough to his progress to mention:

1. The task is much broader than merely teaching a child to read (or talk or write).
2. The amount of adult assistance needs to be planned in stages.
3. The battle between routine and flexibility requires teacher/parent awareness, planning and, in fact, a tactical offensive effort.
4. The need for early intervention seems to be valid but appropriate methodology and assistance are not always readily accessible to parents or teachers.
5. The mere assumption that a child has adequate (or inadequate) visual and auditory acuity is not a good one to make when dealing with autistic-like children as sensory input is not always what it seems.
6. The visual literacy of a child may have to be developed or at least refined.
7. The use of LEA with someone who does not talk is indeed an experience.
8. The passage of time between physical experiences and communication activities poses a problem.
9. The utilization of color may be helpful.
10. The personal involvement of the child is essential.

11. The preparation of the LEA manuscript (the way the teacher or parent hand writes the experience so that it can be read) is a problem because different people use and mix several styles of handwriting; the scribes scribble in different ways.
12. The hand-eye coordination necessary for pupil involvement in the handwriting process is considerable and needs to be planned for, developed and monitored.
13. The utilization of strip banks may be helpful.
14. The situations needed in order to "teach" tenses and pronominalization are incredibly complex; tenses and pronominalization are especially confusing for an autistic child.
15. The home-school coordination and follow-through is a monumental task for both parents and teachers.
16. The war against teacher and parent burn-out is a raging, on-going battle.

Reflective Thoughts on How to do it and Why

Suppose you have a child (one of your own or one in your class) who seems to have much potential but has a serious language disorder, is communicatively disabled, mildly impaired or profoundly handicapped. The exact nature or diagnosis is probably not that relevant since many children with specific diagnoses have quite a variety of individual characteristics which make teaching them difficult. Several suggestions follow: with each suggestion is the reasoning behind the suggestion. You, the practitioner, will have to determine if the suggestion and its reason make sense for the children with which you work. Most suggestions are intended as basic starting points and may be (should be) changed as soon as success determines

that a more challenging step can be taken (or as soon as it has proven to be unhelpful).

The suggestions given relate to the common and uncommon sense of the situation presented in the previous section. Each of the uncommon sense items is reintroduced with some explanation and reasoning.

1. One's conception of utilizing EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE needs to be broader than teaching the child to read using already developed oral skills. If Mark's parents had waited for Mark to develop oral language before they began working with him, he might never have developed any language.

Don't be too concerned with identifying which area of communication you are specifically trying to develop or improve; try to work on ALL of them at all times. Teaching the child to write may help his reading; improved speaking and listening learning might be a natural outgrowth of attempted reading instruction. Mark seemed to learn to talk as he learned to write (and read). In fact, at one point in his development he actually wrote things on the chalkboard before he would (could?) say them. Many years were spent with Mark having speech therapy (which was certainly appropriate and helpful), but if it were being done again attempts to quadruple the use of the visual, tactile, kinesthetic experiences at the same time as the work on speaking and listening would be made. There is no reason to believe that the communication processes in the brain are as separated as we make them. [Reading is not 8:30 - 9:30; handwriting is not 3:00 - 3:15 Monday, Wednesday and Friday; nor is spelling 11:30 - 12:00 daily and writing (composition) the last two six weeks of the year.] Recent and non-recent research indicates that at a very early age children know a lot about language (most of which they are never able to explain to anyone). Most are incredible grammarians prior to attending school; many can read one or more of several types of

graphically represented materials; many can write at least their own names; a few are coordinated enough to be fairly capable spellers and handwriters. The task is to use what they know, have learned and can do, to teach them to do what they currently cannot do. Mark gives one good reason to believe that at least one child (Mark) learned to talk by learning to write and read; isn't it possible there are more "in his boat?" There has been a lengthy debate about the importance of learning modes for older students... IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THIS REACHES TO EVEN THE PRESCHOOL/INFANT LEVEL? Before saying "NO", go to the institutions, nursing homes and special classes and work with children who can't talk and TRY it! Many of these children were "discarded" because they couldn't speak--in most cases it is doubtful if anyone even tried to teach them to read and/or write. After all, "How do you expect me to teach him/her to read?--He/she can't even talk!" Is it possible for someone to learn to read and/or write without the benefit of speech? This is probably not known because most of the systems (methods, tests, etc.) are geared to using oral language and few even try with the ones who can't "talk."

Try to use both the oral and the written modes (both sending and receiving). Try to stimulate interest in all areas of communication; try to model, demonstrate, and give examples of the many facets of communication. Do not instruct as though the communication modes are isolated from each other in the learning process. Never rule out the possibility of using a different mode until it has proven itself ineffective (and even then periodically retry it if other means are not working). Make the auditory and visual input simultaneous as often as possible. Strive to teach the child better communication facility and use any one or combination of speaking, listening, reading and writing to facilitate the learning of any other communication aspect.

2. Have as your general plan a mechanism for beginning with maximum teacher assistance (even language input in some cases) and work toward independence in stages (Strickland, 1969, pp. 302-313). The first stage would have the teacher handwriting the information dictated by the child (and providing the language if the child isn't communicative). In this stage there is no need and no pressure for the child to do anything other than talk about the experience (so it can be written by the teacher) and later listen to it being read back by the teacher. As soon as possible, the child is encouraged to read along with the teacher and ultimately read the material alone. (This was no problem for Mark because his rote memory, as with many autistic-like children, is exceptionally good.) Stage two is guiding the child to copy what the teacher has written. (Suggestions eleven through thirteen deal rather specifically with this stage.) Stage three is gradually moving the child into composing graphically (writing). This eventually replaces one of the teacher's roles as the amount of assistance needed by the child gradually and continuously approaches a level where little or no help is needed by the child. Writing and reading without assistance is the fourth stage and the ultimate goal.

3. Watch the routine established with your instructional attempts. Make a part of the routine, varying the routine. If you have never worked with autistic-like children, this may not make sense; if you have worked with autistic-like children, it will likely seem obvious. Such children are often exceedingly routine-bound and they will be upset if the routine established initially isn't followed each time that the activity is attempted. Routine is often helpful and all of us are the beneficiaries and the casualties of routines (one's personal routines and the routines of the others with which one interacts). Routine facilitates life's activities; however, teachers and pupils often get themselves into rituals which become

boring and counter-productive. Mark wanted and needed routine desperately, but routine, Mark's way, would close the door to change and lock one into the eventual trap of absolute sameness. When working with autistic-like children care and forethought should be given FROM THE BEGINNING to establishing a routine that will be "standard" enough to be helpful and yet flexible enough to permit the kinds of things that must be done. Changes should be "routinely" planned so that change becomes a vital (routine) part of the routine. For example, don't always: do it at the same time, in the same place, in the same chair, on the chalkboard (or in the same pad), use the same sentence patterns, use the same paper-picture format, utilize the same pencil or pen or marker. Don't change all of the factors at once, rather, systematically vary the procedure so that variety is part of the routine.

4. Early intervention has long been advocated. What-to-do, where-to-get materials, and how-to-do-it are not always easily determined. Mark's father had an eye-to-eye discussion with a well-known advocate of early intervention and corresponded with another authority about 1970; a terse, approximate summary of their help would read, "Early intervention is important but as of now we don't know what to do or how to go about it." Maria Paluszny's book shares this account, "One autistic child with whom the first author had contact had received no fewer than twenty-four different diagnoses. That represented twenty-four visits to various centers, twenty-three of which found the child to be an 'interesting case,' but 'inappropriate' for their program" (p. 140). It was difficult for Mark's parents to help him. His interest in books was marginal; his interest in people was minimal. When Mark's language and visual deficit was recognized his parents tried to locate books and materials that had pictures that were accurate representations of actual things in Mark's "world". Fantasy books were not helpful

since they dealt with abstract circumstances and Mark did not even deal linguistically with concrete ideas. Language EXPERIENCE (LEA) with the initial emphasis on EXPERIENCE was a "What-to-do" and a "How-to-do" and Mark and his own personal life and happenings (accidental and planned) were the "Materials-to-use."

The parents were thoroughly vaccinated with "language experience" serum as undergraduates in an elementary education teacher training program; perhaps this cultured the early use of the technique with Mark. Prior to age four, a family photograph was given to Mark in "his" notebook. Under the photo was carefully written, "Mommy, Daddy and me." (All the words at this time were from the parents since Mark did not talk about the pictures.) Other very early (approximately age four) uses of the LEA technique (using parent language) included: a page of fourth birthday photographs labeled, "My Birthday 1970"; a Christmas photograph of Mark labeled, "Our Christmas tree and me"; a family Christmas Polaroid photograph labeled, "On Christmas Day at Grandma and Grandpa Shepherd's house, Daddy took a picture of Gene, Grandpa, Uncle Glen, Gary, Mark, Janice, Mommy, Grandma and Aunt Geneva."; a picture of a new (baby) cousin labeled "Baby Scott"; a picture of Mark in his new Christmas suit labeled "This is me in my Christmas suit"; a picture of Mark during bathtub splash time labeled, "This is me taking a warm bath"; a picture of Mark beside a newly constructed first snowman - no label; a picture of Mark and his grandparents labeled, "One day while Mark, Mommy and Daddy were visiting Grandpa and Grandma Milner's house, Daddy took a picture of Grandpa, Grandma and Mark."

5. Don't make assumptions about visual or auditory abilities (acuity or perception). The younger the child the more difficult it is to determine (or correct) visual or auditory problems. Mark was exposed to many experiences during the first 18 months of his life; he got his eight plus diopter

(correction for myopia) glasses to begin the 19th month of his life. The parents now know that much of what had been pointed out to him and assumed to be relevant stimuli was less than nothing...in fact, it was probably confusing and terribly illogical because his visual acuity ended somewhere nearer than six inches from his eyes! Who knows what, if, or how even the close things that were seen were perceived? Check eyes, ears, and vocal apparatus as well as you possibly can. This is quite a problem if the child is noncommunicative (and perhaps very young, too). Some autistic-type children are assumed to have hearing problems because they do not respond to talk (at least in a typical way). It was one trauma after another to get Mark's vision evaluated and corrected--if he could talk, we could get him glasses--if he could see, he might be better able to communicate. Even with corrected acuity, Mark still had to be taught to be visually literate. (Six through nine following are detailed suggestions for dealing with various factors related to visual comprehension.)

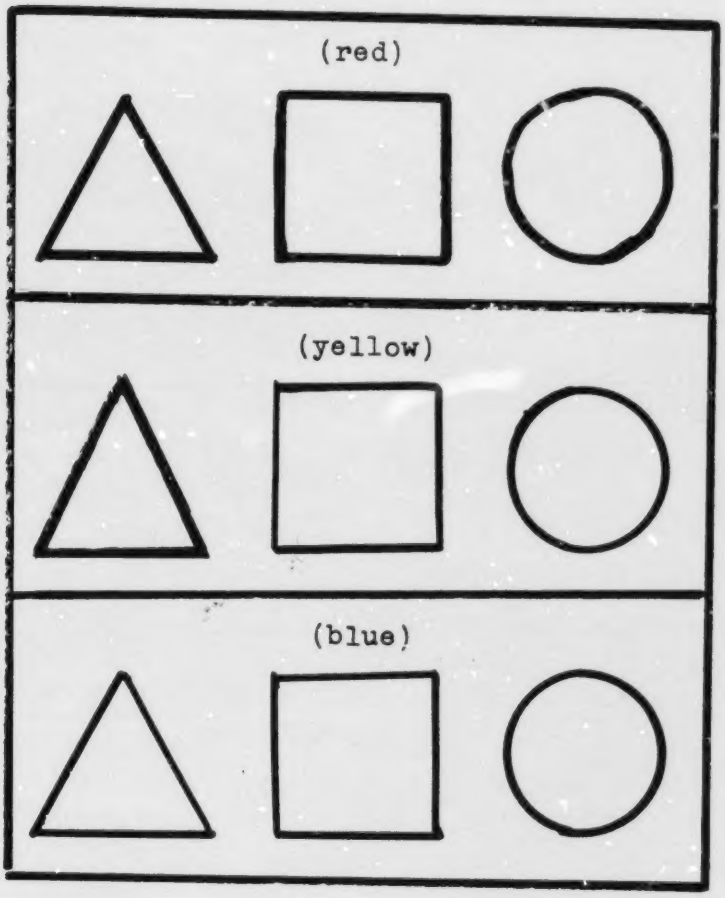
6. Visual literacy (ability of the mind to discriminate and make sense of or "read" pictures, scenarios or actual happenings that are seen) is so often taken for granted that few teachers would be troubled by someone telling them to show the child a picture and let him tell you about it. It is likely an atypical teacher who stops and wonders if the child is seeing what she/he is seeing or wonders if what is seen on the flat surface of a picture is relevant or in any way meaningful to the child. Perhaps due to Mark's obvious vision problems (myopia and strobismus) the parents also questioned his visual literacy; perhaps it was due in part also to the encouragement and assistance later (1972) given the parents by a competent visual therapist (optomotrist)--who knows why? Mark seemed to get so little from any visual stimuli. Trips to the zoo left the parents unsure whether

Mark had seen the lion, the bars on the cage, only the lion's tail, the lion's water pail or even the blocks in the back of the lion's cage.

One toy that Mark had seemed to help more than anything to bridge this visual gap. It was a form board with nine insets. See Figure 1. There was a circle, a triangle and a square in three different colors (red, blue and yellow). The form board was thin (probably two thicknesses of masonite or about one-fourth inch thick and the insets were about half this thickness or about one-eighth inch thick--since the toy has long since gone the way of outgrown toys, an exact description is not possible); it was approximately ten inches by twelve inches with insets about two-and-one-half inches across. These were helpful because they could be taken in hand, touched, chewed, and even rubbed over one's body and then be placed back into the form board and be flush with the surface; this made them more like a flat one dimensional picture. Mark learned those three shapes and those three colors and it was obvious that he knew and discriminated along the lines called for and assumed. The shapes could also be used to trace around on paper and Mark was then asked to make the same discriminations on the totally flat, paper dimension. Then the size and color, placement, position were varied to confirm and promote generalization and avoid routine hand-ups (Suggestion Three). Family photographs were also utilized as explained in Suggestion Four. These types of activities seemed to promote visual literacy. In retrospect, one wonders about the possibilities for utilizing a video-tape machine to capture, stop and compare the picture to the "real" object. Perhaps mirror activities and even photographs or video-tapes of the child looking at self in the mirror would help the eyes learn to "read" one dimensional representations (pictures). (Suggestions Seven and Eight also relate to this suggestion.)

Figure 1

Three Color - Three Shape Form Board



7. How to utilize a language experience approach with someone who didn't use language at all was quite a problem initially. It now seems natural to suggest that if the child is unable or unwilling to speak, the teacher should provide appropriate language for the child. This "model" should approximate the "known", "normal" child language learning sequences. Example: Begin with labeling things (nouns); use holophrastic language (a highly meaningful one word utterance); later employ telegraphic, kernel-type, phrases; then move to simple sentences; later pad the sentences; last of all, if ever, such things as double speak, cliches, figures of speech or other confusing constructions might be attempted. Pronominalization is a problem; think about what "you" are doing and who is talking. See Figure 2. Don't expect or try labeling "actions" or "causations" until the more concrete noun-type usages are attained. (It isn't necessary to totally avoid them, but it seems sensible to concentrate on the most concrete possible items, i.e., nounish things). Recently, the term "motherese" has been used to describe the Berko-Gleason type of mother/infant communication (baby talk); use "motherese" as your oral and written model if the child does not or cannot provide you with an oral model. If Mark's parents were to start over, they would even try recording (in writing) some of Mark's non-English (non-words) "kadoik", "geeeee", "cha-ling", etc., since recent findings with some autistic-like children seem to indicate that once an adult accepts the child and his/her "non-known-language" representations and participates with him/her, then a "bond" forms which may foster the child's learning from the adult. [This has even been utilized in non-language situations, i.e., the adult imitates the child's movements (walking on tip toes, etc.) in order to attempt to establish a "relationship"/"bond"/"basis" for "sharing" movement(s) if nothing else (University of California, "Looking for Me").]

Figure 2

Examples of Language Learning Sequence

Holophrases: "Wagon"

"Daddy"

"Mark"

Telegraphic language examples: "Mark's wagon"

"Ride wagon"

"Pull wagon"

"Daddy pull"

"Daddy wagon"

Simple sentence examples:

"Daddy is pulling the wagon."

"I am riding in the wagon."

"Daddy is pulling me in the wagon."

Padded sentence examples:

"Daddy is pulling Mark in the red wagon."

"Daddy is pulling me down the drive in my shiny, new red wagon."

Confusing construction example:

"Daddy is playing horse while Mark takes it easy in his fiery chariot."

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[Note: This 16 mm. film is available from Southern Illinois University -Carbondale film library Number 5-1568.]

Obviously if language is available from the child, use it initially; until the child talks, create models as suggested in the preceding items. When possible, begin to control the experiences so that they allow/foster/relate/establish/develop/motivate/encourage/direct toward/enhance/facilitate/"set up" the most logical or reasonable next step in language/communication development. (Plan to have experiences to generate the appropriate language for the next step in reading/writing/speaking instruction.)

8. Time was/is a problem; the "space" between a happening and the talking, writing, reading and listening about it created a major problem. Initially Mark's parents used professionally-produced family portraits and prints of slides and other pictures of Mark and his family (see Suggestion Four). However, it took so long to get the prints that the experience seemed to have died in Mark's head. So the parents began to capture as much as possible of important experiences (to use for reading, writing or speaking) in instant prints (Polaroid). The pictures provided a helpful, immediate reference point and later served as a comprehension aid. Immediacy was important so that the language (oral and written) could be immediately selected, used and/or verified. Photographs are often the most concrete representation that one has to use as a referrent for what has happened or what has been done. Edgar Dale (1969) is well known for categorizing levels of concreteness. Actually having a "direct purposeful experience" (p. 107) is the most concrete possible exposure; taking a photograph of the actual happening permits a more concrete item of reference than utilizing verbal symbols alone (according to Dale's cone of experiences). The photograph provides a means of isolating and capturing for later reference some part(s)

imperative that the experiences involve Mark both in the activity and in the picture since that was the only way to be sure that he was even aware of what was taking place. (This may have been due in part to his visual difficulties but was also possibly due to his autistic-like tendency of not giving eye contact or wanting or allowing his attention to be directed; or this may have been because of the visual concerns discussed in items five and six. Either, neither or both might be true but personal involvement is consistent with what is known about the egocentric nature of all young children.) Initially the experience and the picture worked best if it was a picture of Mark and his own wagon; a picture of anyone else or another wagon (other than his) got little or no response. Dale (1969) suggests that the most concrete of experiences is relevant personal encounters; so why not use the most personal, important or liked object or activity in the child's life and let it help teach the child to communicate? Begin with a favorite toy, food, book, bed, pacifier, string, etc. A recent example of the importance of this principle was related to the writer by the parent of a child diagnosed as autistic. His child would not search for the test items hidden by the tester during a psychological evaluation (object permanence). But he immediately jerked up the cloth used to hide the objects when HIS STRING (he is a string carrier) was taken from him and placed out of sight, beneath the visual barrier. (The father had suggested using the string to the psychologist who reluctantly did it; it obviously proved a point but also irritated the tester as this was not "standard" procedure! Some children aren't "standard" children either so wake up and smell the coffee in the child's kitchen.)

(Additional thoughts about relevance and involvement brings to mind a basic need: food. Since it is such a universally needed and valued sub-

of an experience. It is suggested here that (at least in the initial stages) the actual experience is essential; the picture of the actual happening merely permits one to have a cue for "returning" to the experience when attempts are made to talk, read, write or listen (or instruct in reading, writing, talking or listening). Although untried with Mark, videotaping could provide another means for "capturing" experiences.

9. Color was/is an important factor in Mark's learning. It was first noted when he would attend to television at his grandparents' home and would totally ignore it in his own home; the grandparents had color television and the parents a black and white television. Initially, polaroid pictures were of little value if they were not color, so the majority of the early prints were color film; black and white prints were gradually and systematically introduced and utilized. An additional note of interest--Mark's first piano teacher taught him to read music by color-coding it. She copied all his music and made all the c's red, all the d's blue, all the e's were green, etc. Mark can now (laboriously) read "black and white" music but spends most of his time playing "by ear" songs he has learned through his ears. Color obviously adds an additional clue element and would seem to be most visually stimulating; beyond this no explanation is offered for its value to Mark. When Mark was learning color words, the words were lettered in the color of the word initially (p u r p l e was lettered with a purple marker, etc.) and later one by one reduced to black on white. Color seemed to be a help in starting Mark into a lot of different activities, perhaps it would help other children, too, if used initially with care and planning and then gradually faded.

10. Being personally involved in the content, not just observing it, seemed essential to getting through to Mark. In the beginning it seemed

stance, it is bound to be important to the child and could possibly be much more integrally involved in the instructional process than it's mere use by behaviorists to reinforce desired behaviors.)

11. Clean up the handwriting! "Normally" functioning children have enough of a problem trying to decode well-made letters (graphemes); is there any reason to believe that those having problems functioning "normally" need less good models? (No, they probably need even more carefully lettered manuscripts.) When writing experience stories or labels or charts or guides for children, make the letters accurately and consistently. Were one to take the time to go through all of Mark's "stories" one could find "a" written correctly no less than four ways (*a* a *a* A) and probably at least a dozen ways sloppily enough that someone who can already read couldn't "decode" it. Parents, teachers, aides, therapists, tutors, resource persons of all varieties, relatives and baby sitters should all ideally provide exact and consistent graphic models. It won't ever happen!--Can consistency and correctness be improved? There is much evidence that visual disorders confound the learning-to-read process--common sense tells one to provide accurate, neat and consistently produced graphic representations of what we expect children to decode. Typing (primary typewriter preferred) might be appropriate in some cases at some stages of the process.

12. Do not expect children to be able to copy (their story, chart, sentence, etc.) over a long distance expecially if there is a change in plane. This suggestion is closely related to suggestions five, six and eleven because it also involves the visual aspect of reading and writing. Initially, Mark could not even trace (reproduce on the same plane at no distance). It is not within the scope of this article to discuss all the details of developing the visual abilities needed to be able to copy from

the chalkboard when one is seated several feet from the board. But please realize that initially the children should be allowed to trace (with felt tip marker or crayon-type tool) the manuscript you have provided for them. Next, provide a manuscript (for copying) that leaves space directly below the original for copying. Later the manuscript model may be such that more visual "hold" (still on the same plane) is necessary in order to copy the model. If success is gained with all the above, then move to copying from a different plane at close distance and gradually (as success permits) move to greater distances. See examples in Figure 3.

13. Instead of using the traditional "three by five" cards to record work bank words, use half inch to one inch high cardboard strips. Make the strip only as long as is needed for that word. The procedure works especially well for children who have trouble with handwriting. Mark was not well coordinated and had known hand-eye coordination problems so it was not feasible for him to handwrite (trace--much less copy or create) until he was well advanced of the normal expected age for such activity. The parents and teachers took the words that he could read (in context) from "his" stories and wrote each word on a cardboard strip for him to learn as an isolated unit. The words were then quickly used in another context by making new sentences by rearranging appropriate word strips so they made a new sentence. Mark was asked to read the new sentence. Eventually he was able to complete novel sentences begun by a teacher (simply by selecting one or more of his word strips and placing it in or onto the teacher-begun sentence). As Mark became able to perform handwriting tasks, the need for this diminished. If you choose to utilize this "strip bank," be sure to redo the strips frequently as some children cue on things other than graphemes (letters) written on the strip. Changing the size of the

Figure 3

Copying: Plane and Distance Sequence

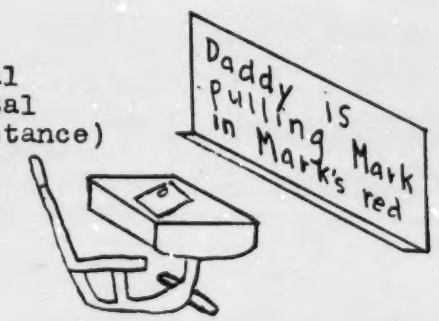
Wagon (trace)

Mark wagon
Mark wagon (copy under on same plane)

Daddy is pulling Mark in Mark's red wagon.
Daddy (copy under on same plane with distance)

(copy from vertical plane to horizontal plane - short distance)

(flat desk top: horizontal plane)



(chalkboard = vertical plane)

(copying from vertial plane to horizontal plane - long distance - move desk gradually farther away from the chalkboard)

strips and perhaps using primary type, and conventional type as well as manuscript is appropriate.

14. Tenses and pronominalization are a problem. Two things seemed to help Mark. One was careful planning in creating experiences and pictures that would lend themselves to the particular problem singled out for work. The second was role playing (actually modeling); the family members would demonstrate appropriate use and involve Mark (puppets might work for some children).

It seemed necessary to take only one or two items at a time (I or you) and work with them until they were understood, then move to another (we, they, etc.) with constant review. The area of male and female pronominalization has been exceedingly difficult during the late 1960s and 1970s due in part, at least, to the lack of distinct dressing and grooming differences between the sexes. Imagine if you will, trying to teach someone who is minimally visually literate to conscientiously pick up all the clues necessary to determine if she/he is speaking to or about a "he" or a "she" who is clean shaven with shoulder length hair and wearing slacks, boots, a long-sleeved flannel shirt and a gold chain around the neck.

Photographs are very helpful with past tenses. A calendar on which the parents insist that Mark write important-to-him, upcoming happenings has been some concrete help in dealing with future tense.

15. Home-school cooperation and coordination is essential to most school/home success; it seems doubly crucial for autistic-like pupils. For over six years Mark's parents and his teachers have corresponded DAILY about him. He carries a note each morning from the parents telling about activities the evening before (for use in language, writing, reading, etc.) and until recently also often a Polaroid photograph of some of the

home happenings. In the evening the teacher or aide writes a note back telling of past and future school events so that the parents may communicate with Mark and make sure that the information is being correctly processed. For at least the last two years, Mark has been able to write and read his own experience stories either from home happenings or school happenings. (Recently, Mark began opening the letters and reading them on his way to or from school.) In addition to the daily written communication, hundreds of telephone calls have passed between parents and teachers and aides as well as, for three years there were meetings every two or three weeks with the teacher, often the aide, sometimes the speech therapist, the parents, and usually a counselor consultant on behavior modification attending. It's a lot of work! Mark's worth it!

16. Suggestion sixteen makes a baker's fifteen; it does not really directly relate to teaching communication skills. BUT it directly relates to surviving as a parent and a teacher of any special (and especially autistic-like children. Conversations with three mothers (of autistic-like children) within the last month convinces the writer that all three are clinging to their mental health with a desperation clutch (and all three now have white knuckles). The whereabouts of all of Mark's former teachers is not currently known, but at least one no longer teaches special children and at least one (for health reasons) has quit teaching and is studying to become a school psychologist. Teaching normal children is hard work; teaching special children is probably more of a stressful situation than teaching normal children and teaching children with communicative disorders is mind bending! The same is true of parenting in a parallel sense. Everyone needs to give and get all the physical, emotional and specialized help that can be mustered or BURN OUT will consume all. When "burn out"

occurs, the problem has been confounded because there now exists the need to care for the one who was formerly caring for the person with the problem. Salvaging special parents and teachers is a must if progress is to be maintained and continued.

An EXPERIENCE LANGUAGE approach (author's variation of LEA) puts the emphasis on having the experience first and then creating language to go with the experience. Sometimes teachers or parents must model the language since there are those who cannot generate language of their own to relate to experiences (present or past). Such an approach helped one autistic-like child learn to read, write and talk. It might help other children. Even if there is NO child language to utilize for language experiences, begin by taking the child's environment and use familiar people, places and products to form the foundation for both the oral and written skills which need to be developed. Be as "holistic" (include as many aspects of language and experience simultaneously) as possible as efforts are made to develop communication skills. Heavy odds operate to keep "autistic" people short-circuited; nothing is easily accomplished with a non-communicative child; however, utilizing familiar (known/personal) circumstances in as concrete a way as possible might be the basis for opening a communication system for the disabled and disordered. It worked once; unless you have something that has proven itself to work more effectively, TRY IT!!!

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